

Exegetical Brief: First Thessalonians 4:4

"That each of you should learn to acquire a wife in a way
that is holy and honorable."

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1 Thessalonians 4 ³ Τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ ἁγιασμός ὑμῶν, ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας, ⁴ εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ, ⁵ μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδότα τὸν θεόν, ⁶ τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πράγματι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, διότι ἔκδικος κύριος περὶ πάντων τούτων, καθὼς καὶ προείπαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ διεμαρτυράμεθα.

³It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; ⁶and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.

In some believers' lives there may be one danger, in particular, that threatens to obscure their testimony and obliterate their faith. For the brothers in Thessalonica it was sex outside of marriage. St. Paul confronts that danger head-on in chapter four of First Thessalonians.

Paul reminds his readers of the instructions in holy living he had given them earlier, and he asserts that those instructions had come at the command of the Lord Jesus. "This is God's will," he continues, "your sanctification." What follows are three clauses that expand on how their sanctification was to express itself. The NIV translators express them this way:

v. 3 "that you should avoid sexual immorality";

v. 4-5 "that each of you should learn to control his own body (footnote, *Or learn to live with his own wife; or learn to acquire a wife*) in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God";

v. 6 "and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him."

Verse 4 seizes the reader's attention. That any translation would offer three different renderings of the same phrase is unusual. That this is a valuable passage for pastors who preach, teach, and counsel makes it worth a closer look.

"You should avoid sexual immorality" (v. 3) is a general admonition. The Jerusalem council had recently agreed to stress this for the benefit of Gentile Christians, and there were plenty of them in Thessalonica to hear it. The command that follows, that each should "control his own body"—from the NIV's preferred rendition of verse 4—would be just as general, simply stating verse 3 in the positive. Yet one wonders whether that is all St. Paul had in mind with verse 4. Granted, the word *σκεῦος* (literally "object," "instrument," "container," or "vessel") is typically used in the New Testament metaphorically. The word *σκεῦος* would make sense here as a metaphor one's own "body," but is "wife" actually the better interpretation?

The answer to the question centers on the infinitive *κτᾶσθαι*. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 it appears as follows: *τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, ...εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ*. Every other time *κτᾶσθαι* is used in Scripture, it means to "acquire" or "procure." In other words, it has the idea of getting something that one previously did not possess. In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican, for instance, the Pharisee boasted, "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get [*κτῶμαι*]" (Lk 18:12, NIV). Jesus

once sent out the Twelve with the command, "Do not acquire [κτῆσησθε] gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts" (Mt 10:9, NASB). Later he reassured the persecuted, "By standing firm you will gain [κτῆσασθε] life" (Lk 21:19, NIV). Peter reprimanded Simon because he assumed he was able to "obtain [κτᾶσθαι] the gift of God with money" (Ac 8:20, NASB). The Holy Spirit's writers consistently employ this shading of κτᾶσθαι. It is most natural to take it the same way here in First Thessalonians 4. Paul's progression of thought, then, moves from a general admonition (v. 3) to a more specific directive needed in the Thessalonian church (v. 4-5). The infinitives at the start of v. 6 then state the intended results of such godliness.

Taking κτᾶσθαι as "to acquire" makes the interpretation of σκεῦος much easier to determine. In this passage Paul would not be encouraging each Thessalonian to learn how "to acquire his own *body* in holiness and high regard." Obviously men do not acquire their own bodies; they already have them. Instead Paul is urging each to proceed in a way that is holy and honorable as he acquires another person of his very own, namely, his wife. The rabbis routinely referred to a man's wife as his σκεῦος. They did not do so in a disparaging way, but simply as a more delicate way of referring to a woman as her husband's sexual partner. Certainly the Creator had that blessing in mind, among others, when he formed Eve as the "suitable helper" for Adam. As a matter of fact, Peter in his first epistle uses the noun σκεῦος directly for a man's wife as well as by implication for a woman's husband: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner [σχεύει] and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Pe 3:7, NIV).

You will not find the New Testament writers employing κτᾶσθαι specifically for the act of acquiring a wife. You will see that use of the verb, however, should you turn to the Septuagint. The LXX uses a form of κτᾶσθαι as it reports Boaz' marriage announcement to the elders of Bethlehem. He said, "I have also acquired [κέκτημαι] Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife [ἐμαντῶ εἰς γυναῖκα]" (Ru 4:10). A proverb in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (also called Ben Sira, or Sirach) uses κτᾶσθαι in a similar fashion—twice, in fact: "He who procures a wife [κτώμενος γυναῖκα] makes the beginning of an acquisition [ἐνάρχεται κτήσεως], a helper fit for him and a pillar of support" (Si 36:29).

Bible scholars have been arguing about the interpretation of τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι since the patristic age. Theodoret, Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, and Tertullian favored "to control his own body," for example, while Theodore of Mopsuestia and Augustine of Hippo advocated "to acquire his own wife." Little is gained here by appeals to the church fathers. One recent scholar contends that for a Hellenistic Jew like Paul of Tarsus, κτᾶσθαι might have taken on a durative sense and should therefore be translated "hold" or "live with" one's own wife. He provides few examples of this phenomenon from the Septuagint or elsewhere, however. Another suggests from his studies of the papyri that κτᾶσθαι was beginning to be understood as to "use properly" or "control." His examples too are few.

Some object that if τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι is to be understood as "to acquire his own wife," then what Paul writes to the Thessalonians amounts to a command that all men must marry. Paul's words to the Corinthians, "It is good for a man not to marry" (1 Co 7:1), provide a balanced understanding of God's will. It is noteworthy that the very next verse of First Corinthians is strikingly similar to this passage in First Thessalonians. In 1 Co 7:2 Paul contends, "Because of sexual immoralities [τὰς πορνείας], let each man have his own wife [τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα]." Here in 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul urges the sanctified to "avoid sexual immorality [τῆς πορνείας]," then calls upon each man to learn "how to acquire his own wife [τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος] in holiness and high regard."

For many believers of our time one danger, in particular, threatens to obscure their testimony and

obliterate their faith: They are tempted to regard sexual activity prior to marriage as a harmless choice. Sadly, it is estimated that nearly five million unmarried couples in our country live together without a marriage vow and that over half of all first marriages are now preceded by cohabitation. While most young Americans would undoubtedly be thrilled someday to "acquire" the right person, get married, and raise a family, many would indulge the flesh with multiple sexual partners prior to that commitment. So a young man cheats on his bedmate's future husband. He steals the sexual intimacies that rightly should have belonged someday to that husband alone—to someone who may even be his brother in the faith. Worse yet, his conduct transgresses the holy commandment of his God.

Called in Jesus' name to shepherd those not yet married, pastors see plenty of evidence of these sinful attitudes and actions. How heartbreaking to observe even in the church that marriage so frequently and unashamedly is dishonored by those who aspire to it. Yet what a weapon pastors have in the Word of God! In classroom, pulpit, and one-on-one conversation they will declare unbendingly that "God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (He 12:4b), that "the Lord will punish men for all such sins (1 Th 4:6). When the Spirit's sword cuts deep and those wounded by the law's threats cry out, the pastor applies the healing balm of the forgiveness of sins. He carefully speaks the absolution, reverently distributes the nourishing food of the Supper, and joyfully reminds the repentant of their washing in baptism. The pastor also calls for holy living that pleases God and bears witness to the world. For that too he will speak with clear voice, including in his instructions a passage that need not be muddled by several alternate translations. St. Paul's words to the men of Thessalonica are a call to holiness for all, including those who hope to marry someday: "This is God's will, your sanctification, that you should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to acquire a wife in a way that is holy and honorable." Brothers, speak that holy call with confidence that this too is the Word of God.